



Black and Conservative: Thomas Sowell on Race and Rationalism

While it is true that the majority of black Americans lean leftward, and while it is no less true that the majority of black American intellectuals are full blown leftists, there are black American thinkers who have decidedly — and decisively — repudiated leftist ideology. Thomas Sowell is one such thinker.



Sowell is a conservative in the classical or traditional sense of that term. That is to say, Sowell's thought is located squarely within the intellectual tradition of which [Edmund Burke](#) is widely recognized as the inspiration.

Burke, it may be recalled, articulated that vision that subsequent generations would call “conservatism” in response to the abstract, rationalist metaphysics that the [Jacobins](#) enlisted in the service of the French Revolution. Although [rationalism](#) is a philosophical disposition that has manifested itself in many places and at many times, it reached its zenith during the Revolution. That is, it is during *this* time that its erroneous character, translating, as it did, into an unmitigated disaster, compelled the attention of critics like Burke.

Like Burke and other conservatives before him, Sowell has distinguished himself as among the most notable — and scathing — critics of rationalism of our generation. In his seminal [Knowledge and Decisions](#), Sowell says of rationalism that it “accepts only what can ‘justify’ itself to ‘reason’ — with reason being narrowly conceived to mean articulated specifics.” That the rationalist relies upon “highly rational intellectual ‘models’ of human behavior” that “suffer from an air of unreality” is born out by the consideration that they consist of “hypothetical, computer-like incremental adjustments by coolly calculating decision makers” — *not* “the flesh-and-blood reality of decision by inertia, whim, panic, or rule of thumb.”

Apparently, many people who are familiar with Sowell's work fail to realize that it is ultimately *rationalistic* accounts of inter-group differences that he has spent much of his life combating. Sowell pays particularly close attention to “[the animistic fallacy](#),” a staple of rationalist thought. The animistic fallacy is the doctrine that whenever there is a pattern of some sort, there is “purposeful activity toward the goal achieved [.]” When statistical disparities between racial, ethnic, and religious groups are attributed to “discrimination” or “racism,” you know that the animistic fallacy is at work.

However, rationalism is no less implicated by genetic-based theories of inter-group disparities. This is especially interesting given the mutual exclusivity of the discrimination and genetic models. Sowell writes:

Ironically, the innate inferiority [genetic] doctrine and the opposed “equal representation” [discrimination] doctrine proceed on the same intellectual premise — that one can go from innate



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ability to observed result without major concern for intervening *cultural factors* (emphasis mine). All rationalist theories, whether they are oriented toward racial or other issues, render culture or *tradition* negligible. But since it is his study of racially-oriented topics that most accentuates the anti-rationalist, conservative presuppositions informing Sowell's worldview, it is upon this topic that we will here focus.

The version of rationalism with which Sowell has spent considerable time reckoning is what he calls "[the civil rights vision](#)" (what I will term "CRV" from this point onward). As we have already noted, at the heart of the CRV lies the principle that statistical inequalities among groups can only be accounted for in terms of *discrimination*. This principle, in turn, presupposes three plausible yet demonstrably false assumptions.

"The first," Sowell explains, "is that discrimination leads to adverse effects on the observable achievements of those who are discriminated against, as compared to the discriminators or to society in general." The second is only slightly less evident than the first. "The second assumption is...that statistical differences signal, imply and/or measure discrimination." And the third and perhaps most critical notion to the CRV is "that large statistical differences between groups do not usually arise and persist without discrimination" — i.e. discrimination is *necessary* in order to account for such differences.

The CRV, Sowell states bluntly, is false. Statistical disparities are "commonplace" in societies throughout the world, a brute empirical fact owing to many "historical and cultural reasons" that haven't anything at all to do with discrimination. In fact, the historical record is replete with accounts of groups — Jews in lands throughout the world, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, East Indians throughout different continents, Japanese in America, etc. — that by any number of social indicia were *more successful* than the majority populations with which they co-existed *in spite of* having been systematically discriminated against by the latter.

Take the Japanese in America, for example. The Japanese "encountered persistent and escalating discrimination, culminating in their mass internment during World War II," it is true; but within a little more than a decade following the war's end, they "had about equaled the income of whites," and a decade after that, "Japanese American families were earning nearly one-third higher incomes than the average American family."

Blacks, Sowell admits, constitute a "special case," given their history in America. But even with respect to blacks, the idea that discrimination explains the statistical discrepancies between this group and others fails. Blacks in Latin America, Sowell informs us, never suffered remotely the degree of discrimination that they suffered in the United States. However, economically speaking, blacks in, say, Brazil are significantly further behind blacks in the United States.

Even when we look more closely at blacks in the United States, we discover further strikes against the CRV's discrimination model of inter-group disparities (and, for that matter, the genetic model). If the high rates of crime, illegitimacy, incarceration, and other such pathological phenomena that we witness among contemporary blacks were either "a legacy of slavery" or rooted in nature, then we shouldn't expect to learn that such pathologies are relatively recent. But this *is* what we learn.

Sowell states: "Most black children, even under slavery, grew up in two parent households." Moreover, "as late as the 1920's, "a teenage girl raising a child with no man present was a rarity among blacks [.]"

As for crime, in 1984, Sowell wrote:



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Few people today are aware that the ghettos in many cities were far safer places just two generations ago than they are today, both for blacks and whites. Incredulity often greets stories by older blacks as to their habit of sleeping out on fire escapes or on rooftops or in public parks on hot summer nights. Many of those same people would not dare to walk through those same parks today in broad daylight.

If crime among blacks is “a legacy of slavery,” if it is the product of discrimination, then one would expect for it to have been much worse during a time when discrimination was much worse. But, what we see is that in generations past, when blacks encountered much more discrimination than anything of which contemporary blacks are familiar, crime, like illegitimacy, black youth unemployment, and other social indicia, didn’t remotely approximate the perilous levels at which they currently stand.

There is indeed much in the way of their own intellectual tradition that conservatives, black, white, and other, can learn from Thomas Sowell. And there is much in the way of race relations that Americans of all colors and political persuasions can learn from him as well.

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